





# *Going for the Gold*

It's a competition. It's a production. It's the 2006 SkillsUSA Championships.

Every year, the technical and professional education staff, teachers, and industry partners pull out all the stops to stage the state championships. They transform the Hot Springs Convention Center into a bevy of activity with work stations/testing sites set up for more than 70 competitions. This year, there were three new competitions – motorcycle service technician, crime scene investigation, and medical math.

It is quite a production. This year, about 2,300 people gathered for the annual event for the largest attendance ever, Randy Prather, state SkillsUSA advisor, says.

To make it happen, about 200 people from business and industry donated their time – and nearly \$4 million in equipment, Randy says. The floor of the convention center was lined with semi-trucks, a farm tractor, cars, motorcycles, a jet ski, hospital beds, circular saws, hand tools, restaurant appliances, robotics, and computers.

At one end of the room, the smell of nail polish mingled with hairspray. At the other end, the aroma of baking bread and pastries wafted over the students creating Web pages and TV productions. And in the middle of the room, the smell of freshly sawn lumber gave way to diesel fuel. Over it all hovered a light haze of smoke rising up from the welders' torches.

Everywhere, there were people – talking, walking around, shooting cameras.

In the midst of the sights, smells, and sounds, the students focused on the task at hand – competing for the gold, bragging rights, scholarships, and the chance to shine at nationals.

"There's a lot of distraction," Hervey Galloway, technical and professional education and a former SkillsUSA state advisor, says. That's part of the plan.

Years ago, the various events were spread out over several locations. Hervey says that was a disadvantage for Arkansas students who went on to compete at the nationals where plumbers compete right next to cabinetmakers, masons, electricians, and carpenters in a space that would cover 11 football fields. They were not prepared for the distraction of having all the competitions under one roof.

The Arkansas competition has evolved in other ways over the years to help students be more competitive while preparing them for the workforce. Hervey credits Jim Smith, another former SkillsUSA advisor, with making a significant change – getting the group's industry council to help develop the individual competitions. At this year's event, for instance, Nabholz Construction sponsored six competitions ranging from masonry to electrical. Area chefs laid out the requirements for the culinary arts students and judged the results. And local TV personalities and graphic designers set up the competitions for aspiring news anchors, producers, and Web page designers.

By having industry create the competitions in accordance with national regulations, it keeps the training relevant to employers' needs while involving industry in directly evaluating student performance.

The result is a rewarding educational experience for everyone involved. The business/industry partners who served as judges this year were impressed with the students' performance, Randy says. And he's confident that a number of Arkansas students will bring home the gold from the nationals that will be held June 18-24 in Kansas City.